

## Sunday School

### STEPHEN, THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR.

Acts 6: 8-15; 7: 54-8: 3.

February 21, 1909.

**Golden Text.**—"They stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."—Acts 7:59

#### SHORTER CATECHISM.

Q. 43. What is the preface to the Ten Commandments?

A. The preface to the Ten Commandments is in these words: "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

#### DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—Acts 6: 1-15.

T.—Acts 7: 1-16.

W.—Acts 7: 17-34.

Th.—Acts 7: 35-53.

F.—Acts 7: 54-8: 3.

S.—Rev. 7: 9-17.

#### TOPICAL OUTLINE.

Stephen's Faithfulness—

As a deacon, ch. 6:1-17.

As a preacher, vs. 8-10.

Before the council, vs. 11; ch. 7: 53.

Unto death, vs. 54; ch. 8: 3.

#### LESSON COMMENTS.

If you have planted a new rose-bush or fruit tree, how eagerly you watch the first rose or fruit. The first are the earnest of successive crops for maybe fifty years.

Stephen was the first martyr of the new dispensation. There were many martyrs of the old dispensation, but since the death of Zechariah (Matthew 23: 35), 500 years preceding, there had been none; at least none on record.

How interesting the first man in the long line of witnesses that seal their faith with their blood. That noble army of martyrs includes men and women, boys and girls, from every nation under heaven. The age of martyrs has not yet passed by. From one learn all. As is Stephen so are his successors.

Stephen was converted perhaps on the day of Pentecost. He was once a lost man. He may have heard Peter's arraignment of his countrymen and joined the cry, "Men and brethren, what must we do?" And when Peter lifted up Christ crucified and risen again, the Holy Spirit led them to see that this was the only way to be saved and Stephen accepted Christ and at once entered into fellowship with the Father and the Son.

As a partner with Jesus he first of all shared with him everlasting exemption from the curse of sin.

He then became a co-laborer with Christ in his Messianic Kingdom. Jesus could have translated Stephen to heaven or given him on earth a flowery bed, but he chooses to give him a share with him in labor and toil and suffering. He becomes a witness-bearer to the truth. Like Stephen we must all be witnesses for Jesus (Matthew 10:32).

Stephen bears testimony in his own home, then on the street corners (6: 8, 9), finally before Sanhedrin. He was accused of saying, "This Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us" (6: 14). Therefore he was guilty of blasphemy (v. 13). Now as to the holy place, Stephen shows that Abraham was called not in this place, but in Ur of the Chaldees; that he dwelt in Charran for a time, and never owned a foot of land in Canaan except a burying ground; that Jacob and the twelve had lived in Egypt and for 400 years Israel was a stranger to the good land; that the most signal appearances of God were before the temple was built, and after it was built Solomon himself said that God dwelleth not in temples made with hands (2 Chron. 2:6, 6:18), intimating that if God was gracious before the temple was built he could be just as gracious after its destruction; and that he was not limited in his mercy to times or places.

Then as to Moses and the change of his customs, suppose he did say so. It was inconsistent in them to charge him with blasphemy against Moses; for they, i. e., their fathers, had rejected Moses (7:39-44). This very Moses had predicted the coming of Jesus (v:37), and this Jesus they themselves had just hanged on a tree. They were the rejecters of Moses.

In all this testimony Stephen used plain speech. There was no plastering of the case. He used a sharp knife, faithfully, delicately, skilfully laying bare their iniquity. He was faithful to Jesus all the way through, holding him up to the place that Moses gave him and charging them with being his murderers.

In his bearing before the Council Stephen was absolutely fearless. It is a bold thing to face a lion; but the lion might run. It is a bold thing for one line of men to charge up a hill whereon is another line well armed and desperate; but all the men are never killed. A man takes his life in his hand when he goes into an epidemic, but he doesn't always die.

But here was Stephen confronting certain death. In the faces of his judges he could see his doom written. They were the men that had condemned Jesus with scorn and spitting and afterwards had buffeted and scourged the apostles. Yonder were the stones and close by were the men who would stone him to death. Did Stephen's face grow pallid? Rather, it shone like that of an angel. Was there a tremor in his voice? Not when his face was bright with the light of heaven. Was his manhood weakened when he saw his enemies gnashing their teeth? See him towering above all his judges, fearing not their faces, their eyes, their wrath, their stones, the death that was about to swallow up his body. How we love the brave, fearless man! And the armament of history is dotted with many stars just like Stephen. Behold Elijah and Daniel, Peter and Paul, Luther and John Knox absolutely fearless. See thousands at Rome, in Italy, Scotland, England, all meeting death calmly as Stephen did. What caused this fearlessness? It was fellowship with Christ. They had their eyes on the hills over yonder and the strength of God was theirs.

You desire to be brave? Have fellowship with Jesus.

Stephen was fearless, but also tender hearted. "The bravest are the tenderest; the loving are the daring." Yonder granite mountain is strong enough to breast all the hurricanes and turn the tornado aside. But grasses and flowers grow in the nooks and corners and birds and sonles hide under its strong arms. Stephen is like a rose-covered mountain. Nothing can make him swerve one inch from his duty, but in dying agony his tenderness beams forth in the prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Yonder man has dealt him a heavy blow. "Lord, have mercy on him." Yonder man holding the coats consenting to his death! "Lord, save him from this sin." What caused this tenderness of Stephen? It was the spirit of Jesus that was imparted who prayed on the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." How unlike the ugly spirit of the world!

Read verse 59. Stephen's testimony was now ended. Through grace he had been enabled to stand for Jesus and he now turns his eye to that King. The heaven are opened and he sees Jesus and appeals to him, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Behind him is the City of Destruction. Before him is Mount Zion.

And how will Jesus receive his servant? Here is the first one of the redeemed millions of the new dispensation that goes up to God. Behold Jesus. We are taught that Jesus ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father. The position of dignity. He hears the call of dying Stephen on the earth and lo, he rises and Stephen sees him standing; the attitude of welcome! Come home!